

THE HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE
OF THE MOSAIC OF SAINT DEMETRIUS
AT SASSOFERRATO

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IN THE SPRING of 1949, Professor Otto Demus of Vienna, who at that time resided at Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C., was kind enough to call my attention to a portable mosaic which is preserved in the Museo Civico di Sassoferrato in Italy.¹

Sassoferrato is a small city *delle Marche*, in the province of Ancona, situated on the site of the ancient city of Sentinum. After the complete destruction of Sentinum by the Goths and Lombards, we hear for the first time of the new castle which was built by the inhabitants of the place about the year 1000, and of the new city itself about 1200.²

The mosaic, representing Saint Demetrius of Thessalonica, came to the Museum of Sassoferrato from the collection of the humanist Niccolò Perotti (1429–1480), who, born at Sassoferrato, was a disciple of the humanist Vittorino da Feltre, the translator of Polybius and Plutarch and the author of the first large Latin grammar of the Renaissance. In 1447 Perotti lived close to the famous Cardinal Bessarion, whom he accompanied in 1450–1455 on his mission to Bologna. According to Sergio Bettini, it is probable that Bessarion himself gave Perotti the mosaic, which he later gave to his native town.³

At the Second International Congress of Christian Archaeology, held in Rome in April 1900, at the session of April 21, Luigi Savignoni spoke of this mosaic, as a *reliquiario prezioso* which is found in the commune of Sassoferrato. He presented a photograph of the reliquary and gave a description and interpretation of the mosaic, concerning which Paolo Fontana and Venturi made some remarks. We shall speak of Savignoni's paper in more detail later.⁴

Unfortunately, I have no recent photograph of the tablet as it looks now in the Museum of Sassoferrato. I have used the poor picture reproduced by Bettini, which he took from an old photograph, and upon which the tablet is represented in its entirety, reproducing the parts which are now missing. Since I am interested in this tablet not from the artistic point of view, but from its historical significance, I am satisfied with the reproduction which I find in Bettini's study.

In the center of the tablet is a representation of Saint Demetrius with a halo around his head, in all his military glory, in the garment of a warrior.

¹ I wish to tender my warmest thanks to my friend Professor Milton Anastos of Dumbarton Oaks for his help and suggestions, which have always been of great benefit to my work.

² See the *Enciclopedia Italiana*, XXX (1936), 892; a fine bibliography.

³ Sergio Bettini, "Appunti per lo studio dei mosaici portabili bizantini," *Felix Ravenna*, XLVI (1938), 19–20.

⁴ *Atti del II° Congresso Internazionale di Archeologia Cristiana tenuto a Roma nell' aprile 1900* (Rome, 1902), pp. 422–423.

In his right hand he holds a spear, in his left an oblong shield upon which a lion can be seen. Demetrius' image, composed of small polychrome tesserae, stands out effectively against the golden background, also in mosaic. On each side of the figure of Saint Demetrius there are four decorative lozenges, eight altogether; and within these lozenges there are two Greek inscriptions praising the miraculous military achievements of the martyr.

The left part of the silver border, where one of the Greek inscriptions was located, is now missing; but fortunately the entire left border, including the inscription, can be seen in Bettini's photograph. It reads as follows: ὦ μεγαλομάρτυς Δημήτριε μεσίτευσον πρὸς θεὸν ἵνα τῷ πιστῷ σου δούλῳ τῷ ἐπιγείῳ βασιλεῖ Ῥωμίων Ἰουστινιανῷ δοίῃ μοι νικῆσαι τοὺς ἐχθροὺς μου καὶ τούτους ὑποτάξαι ὑπὸ τοὺς πόδας μου, ("O great martyr Demetrius! Intercede with God that He may help me, Thy faithful servant, the earthly Emperor of the Romans, Justinian, to vanquish my enemies and subjugate them beneath my feet.")⁵

The second Greek inscription, on the right border, has been preserved. It reads: Αὕτη ἡ στάμνος φέρει μύρον ἅγιον ἐκ τοῦ φρέατος ἀντλήσασα ἐν ᾧ τὸ σῶμα τοῦ μυροβλύτου θείου Δημητρίου τοῦτο ἀναβλύζον κείται ἐκτελῶν θαυμάσια πάσῃ τῇ οἰκουμένη καὶ τοῖς πιστοῖς,⁶ ("This jar brings holy oil, which it draws from the well in which the body of the divine Demetrius, bathed with fragrant ointment, lies spouting the latter and working miracles for the whole universe and for the faithful.")

Above the head of Saint Demetrius an ampulla was represented; upon its top is the inscription ἅγιον μύρον (the holy ointment). The ampulla is now missing. On both sides of the ampulla we read the formula IC XC NIKA.

Below Saint Demetrius on the lower border there is a gem, rather anaglyptical in shape, with a figure holding a cross, on both sides of which we read ἅγιος — ἅγιος.⁷

At the two upper corners of the tablet there are two crosses, each of

⁵ This text has been reproduced several times. See A. Mai, *Scriptorum veterum Nova Collectio e vaticanis codicibus edita*, V (Rome, 1931), 30. *Corpus inscriptionum graecarum*, IV, Pars XL, "Inscriptiones christianae" (Berlin, 1877), p. 300 (No. 8642). A. Vasiliev, "An Edict of the Emperor Justinian II, September 688," *Speculum*, XVIII (1943), 10, n. 1. Surprisingly enough, in 1938, without mentioning the previous editions of the inscription by Mai or in the Corpus, Bettini gave a rather bad Greek text of it from the text reproduced in Cecchetelli-Ippoliti, *Sassoferrato e Genga* (Rome, 1932), p. 22; see Bettini, "Appunti per lo studio dei mosaici portabili bizantini," *Felix Ravenna*, XLVI (1938), 20. I have not seen Cecchetelli's publication.

⁶ Mai, *op. cit.*, V, 30. *C.I.Gr.*, IV, 300 (No. 8642). Here again, without knowing these editions, Bettini, using Cecchetelli-Ippoliti's publication, gives a defective text of this inscription (*op. cit.*, p. 21). Instead of ἐν ᾧ he gives ἀενῶ, remarking that this is the adverbial form of ἀένος; he translates it *perennemente* (continually); for ἀναβλύζον, he gives ἀνάβλυζον.

⁷ Mai (V, 30), and, from him, *C.I.Gr.* (IV, 300) describe this gem: "Heic gemma anaglyptica exprimens imaginem cum cruce."

which is surrounded by four Greek letters Β; the two on the right side of the cross are represented in regular form Β, and the two on the left side by the inverted Ϸ. At each corner of the lower border we see the figure of a bicephalous (two-headed) eagle.

In the twentieth century several Italian scholars have become interested in our tablet. As I have noted above, Luigi Savignoni read a paper on a precious reliquary (*reliquiario prezioso*) in the commune of Sassoferrato, at the Second International Congress of Christian Archaeology. According to a brief account of his paper, printed in the *Atti* of the Congress, Savignoni presented a photograph of the reliquary which, unfortunately, has not been published, and said that the figure of Saint Demetrius in this reliquary is a very fine mosaic (*in finissimo mosaico*); he recalled an invocation to Saint Demetrius by Justinian, king of the Romans (*da Giustiniano rei dei romani*). After mentioning the emblem of the bicephalous eagles, he remarked that this emblem seems to refer rather to an emperor of the West than to an emperor of the East, and not at all to the above-named Justinian, because the style of the mosaic is typical of the second Byzantine golden age. Finally Savignoni concluded that the reliquary was an imitation of an older Byzantine piece which had been made in Italy in the fourteenth century; and that this eagle might be that of the Western Emperor Frederick III (1440-1493), with whom Perotti was connected. Following Savignoni's paper, Paolo Fontana, taking into consideration the relatively late form of the bicephalous eagle, remarked that the reliquary could belong neither to Justinian I nor to Justinian II. Then Venturi said that the figure of Saint Demetrius of the reliquary, in the iconographic type of the Saint, corresponds to the representations on Byzantine ivories of the eleventh and twelfth centuries; and that the reliquary is probably a copy executed near the time of the voyage which Niccolò Perotti, then Bishop of Siponto, made in the retinue of Emperor Frederick III.⁸

From the historical point of view, Savignoni's paper, as far as we can judge from the brief published account, is not important. His merit is that, after many years of complete oblivion, he first attracted the attention of Italian scholars to this interesting work of art. Mentioning the name of Justinian, he probably did not wonder if it was Justinian I or Justinian II. The name of Justinian II appeared in the additional remarks of Paolo Fontana. For both of them, however, the importance of Justinian II for the

⁸ *Atti del II° Congresso Internazionale di Archeologia Cristiana* . . . 1900 . . . tutte le sedute (Rome, 1902), pp. 422-423. On Savignoni's paper see a few words by J. Strzygowski, *Byz. Zeitschrift*, IX (1900), 718-719. Savignoni's paper is also referred to in O. M. Dalton, *Byzantine Art and Archaeology* (Oxford, 1911), p. 432.

interpretation and appreciation of the inscription remained entirely unknown.

In 1929, in his book on the art of Le Marche, an Italian region embracing the provinces of Pesaro and Urbino, Ancona, Macerata, and Ascoli Piceno, Luigi Serra gave a rather detailed description of our tablet and of the case in which it is contained. He attributed the tablet to the end of the fourteenth century and found that it had a certain affinity with the tablet of the Museo Vaticano representing St. Theodorus, which is attributed to the eleventh century. Serra, failing to give any picture of our tablet, was not interested at all in its historical significance.⁹

Finally in 1938, in his study on portable Byzantine mosaics, already mentioned, Sergio Bettini devoted a special section to our tablet. After saying that it reached the Museum of Sassoferrato from the collection of the humanist Niccolò Perotti (1429–1480), who was a native of this city, Bettini conjectured that the tablet itself might have been given to Perotti by Cardinal Bessarion as a gift during their journey together to Bologna, in 1450–1455. The time of Perotti's life, that is the fifteenth century, fixes the *terminus ad quem* dating of the mosaic. Another chronological indication consists in the two bicephalous eagles which are the emblem of the last Byzantine emperors, the Palaeologi. As we have indicated above, Bettini reproduced an old photograph of the tablet, gave the text of the two Greek inscriptions in a rather defective form, and supplied it with an Italian translation.

Since according to recent investigations the four Greek capital letters B, which accompany the cross and are also reproduced at the end of the upper border also, as well as the bicephalous eagles which are seen at the ends of the lower border, are the emblems of the period of the Palaeologi, we may conclude that our tablet as it now stands belongs to that period.¹⁰ In this paper I do not intend to discuss at length the complicated question of the four B's represented on our tablet; but I accept the opinion of those who refer this emblem to the later Byzantine times, particularly to the period of the Palaeologi. And here I wish to point out that several portolanos

⁹ Luigi Serra, *L'arte nelle Marche dalle origini cristiane alla fine del Gotico*, con 575 illustrazioni (Pesaro, 1929), p. 344.

¹⁰ On the question of the four B's and the bicephalous eagles in Byzantium — the question which has not yet been entirely clarified — see I. N. Svoronos (Σβορώνος), “Βυζαντιακὰ νομισματικὰ ζητήματα. Ε'. Τὰ παρεκβόλα καὶ ἡ σημαία τῶν Παλαιολόγων,” *Journal international d'archéologie numismatique*, X (1899), 363–389. Giuseppe Gerola, “L'aquila bizantina e l'aquila imperiale a due teste,” *Felix Ravenna* (Nuova serie, Anno IV), XLIII (1934), 7–36. And particularly A. V. Soloviev, “Les emblèmes héraldiques de Byzance et les Slaves,” *Seminarium Kondakovianum*, VII (Prague, 1935), 119–164. There are some other still more recent articles on this question, which clearly show that it has not been settled definitely.

of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries reproduced a red banner with a golden cross surrounded by the four B's waving above Thessalonica, among other cities.¹¹

In addition, I wish to mention here an old, almost entirely forgotten, article by C. Sathas, in which he correctly connects the four B's with the Greek word βασιλεύς and tries to explain the number of the B's by quotations from various Byzantine writers. I do not think that his conclusions are decisive; they fail to solve the question; but the texts which he adduces have almost never been used in this respect and are not without interest.¹²

Sathas was acquainted with our tablet from the *Anecdota litteraria* (Rome, 1774) and from the *Corpus Inscriptionum Graecarum*; and he erroneously proclaimed (p. 93) that this silver tablet was dedicated in 688 by Justinian II to Saint Demetrius, in memory of the miraculous liberation of Thessalonica.

Sathas' thesis is that the four B's are the symbol of the domination of the Byzantine emperors over the four regions of the world, in other words, over the universe. In one of the poems attributed to Theodorus Prodromus (Ptochoprodromus) or to his circle, a poem dedicated to the Emperor Manuel I Comnenus (1143–1180),¹³ the author tries to console the Emperor for his concessions in favor of the Western emperor Frederick I (Barbarossa) and addresses Manuel as τετραύγουστος, i.e., lord of the four regions of the world. In this poem we have the following lines:

ὁμως δὲ σὺ τετραύγουστε, τοῦ τετραυγούστου δίχα
σκήπτρα κρατύνεις κραταιῶς τῆς μονοκρατορίας,

(“But thou, oh lord of the four regions of the world [of the universe], thou holdest mightily the scepter of the sole dominion, even without being the lord of the four regions of the world.”)

¹¹ See A. Soloviev, “Les emblèmes héraldiques de Byzance et les Slaves,” *Seminarium Kondakovianum*, VII (Prague, 1935), 157. V. Laurent, “Le Briquet, emblème monétaire sous les Paléologues,” *Revista Cronica Numismatica și Archeologica* (Bucharest, 1943), Nr. 127–128. I am using here an offprint of this paper with separate pagination, pp. 10–12. In the notes to these studies, the authors indicate interesting source material.

¹² C. Sathas, “Sur les quatre B. Lettre à M. Schlumberger,” *Revue archéologique*, new series, XVIII (1877), 92–101. Sathas closes his article with the statement that a detailed study on this subject will appear in the next number of the *Bulletin de l'Institut de correspondance hellénique* (pp. 92, 101), but this promised study has never come out. Soloviev fails to mention Sathas' article. Svoronos cites it. I. N. Svoronos (Σβορώνος), “Βυζαντιακά νομισματικά ζητήματα. Ε'. Τὰ παρεκβόλα καὶ ἡ σημαία τῶν Παλαιολόγων,” *Journal international d'archéologie numismatique*, X (1899), 369–370.

¹³ Korais (Corais), *Ἀτακτα, I (Paris, 1828), 2, vv. 26–27. Sathas, p. 98. *Poèmes prodromiques en grec vulgaire*, édités par D. C. Hesselung et H. Pernot (Amsterdam, 1910), p. 73, lines 1 z – 1 aa; also index, p. 252.

If we turn to the end of the thirteenth century and to the fourteenth, we come across the word *τετραβασίλειον*, the empire of the four emperors, in a late Byzantine writer, Theodore Hyrtakenos (Θεόδωρος Ὑρτακηνός), who lived under the emperors Andronicus II and Andronicus III Palaeologi (1282–1341). A teacher of grammar and rhetoric in Constantinople, Theodore, according to Krumbacher, was the most begging prose-writer (*Bettelprosaiker*) that Byzantium ever knew.¹⁴

In one of his ninety-three defectively published letters which is addressed to the Emperor (τῷ βασιλεῖ), he gives the word *τετραβασίλειον*, which, according to Sathas (pp. 93–94) was always used by the contemporaries of the Palaeologi to signify the Kingdom of Christ in the four regions of the world. Referring to the rather obscure passage in this letter, Sathas briefly interprets it, saying that Theodore Hyrtakenos, who thoroughly knew the symbolism of the empire, sent to the emperors seeds of pomegranate as a sacred symbol, expressing his wish to see the four crowned emperors, in order that the symbol of the four B's should be fully justified. I do not understand very well this vague and obscure statement by Sathas.¹⁵

I have enlarged upon the article by Sathas, although it may seem to be out of place in this paper because, in my opinion, it would be very desirable to make a new study of the terms *τετραύγουστος* and *τετραβασίλειον* in connection with the question of the four B's.

The question arises, why should a contemporary of the Palaeologi be so much interested in the famous protector and defender of Thessalonica, Saint Demetrius, and why should he include in his piece the Greek inscription which, as we now know exactly, refers to Justinian II who, in 688, in his victorious campaign against "Sclavinia," that is, the Macedonian Slavs, reached Thessalonica, made a triumphal entry into the city, and transplanted about thirty thousand captives, out of the many taken, to Bithynia in Asia Minor. His campaign of 688 was a decisive moment in the history of Slavo-Thessalonican relations; after that time Thessalonica was no longer

¹⁴ Krumbacher, *Geschichte der byzantinischen Litteratur*, 2d ed. (Munich, 1897), p. 484.

¹⁵ The complete, complicated text of Theodore's letter is as follows: τοῦτον δὲ, διὰ ῥοίας γεννημάτων, ἐξάκις πέπομφά σου τῷ κράτει συμβολικῶς, ὡς ἂν, τρεῖς βασιλεύοντες, καὶ τέταρτον συμβασιλεύοντα σχοίητε· οὕτω γὰρ ἂν, ἐκ τεττάρων τελείων, ἄριστ' ἂν διοικῶτο ἡ κοσμικὴ τετράπλευρος πλήρωσις, τετραβασιλείῳ περιφρουρουμένη φιλευσεβεί. F. J. G. la Porte-du Theil, "Les Opuscules et les lettres anecdotes de Théodore l'Hyrtacénien," *Notices et extraits des manuscrits de la Bibliothèque Nationale*, VI (Paris, 1800), 36 (lettre 75). Without a special study of this letter, I cannot give any adequate translation of this text. In his article, Sathas several times mentions the word *τετραβασιλεία*; but in the text there is the word *τετραβασίλειον*. He is right in saying that neither one of these words occurs in DuCange, or in Sophocles, or in Liddell-Scott. But, I may add, the word *τετραβασίλειον* is included in *Thesaurus linguae graecae ab H. Stephano*, VII (Paris, 1848–1854), 2058: *regnum quattuor imperatorum*, with reference to Theodore Hyrtakenos.

harassed or raided by neighboring Slavs. Justinian's triumphal entrance into Thessalonica has been reproduced in a fresco which was discovered at the Church of Saint Demetrius in Thessalonica after the fire of 1917.¹⁶

My aim in this paper is to give a plausible explanation of the reason why the contemporaries of the Palaeologi might have been interested in the old cult of Saint Demetrius and in the early history of Thessalonica.

If we turn our attention to the destinies of Thessalonica at the end of the twelfth century and the beginning of the thirteenth, we shall at once see that this important city occupied the central place in the history of the Balkans. In August 1185, it was captured by the Normans, who were guilty of appalling destruction and massacres; but in the same year, 1185, the Normans were defeated and forced to abandon the city. It is almost certain that the swift liberation of Thessalonica from her powerful enemy was interpreted, at that time, by popular imagination, as the result of the miraculous interference of Saint Demetrius. After the capture of Constantinople by the crusaders in 1204, Boniface of Montferrat received Thessalonica with the surrounding territory, forming the Kingdom of Thessalonica, which he held as a vassal of the Latin Emperor of Constantinople. But Boniface was killed in 1207 in a fight with the Bulgars, and in the same year the Bulgarian King Kalojan, at the siege of Thessalonica, died a violent death. At this time a Greek legend openly speaks of him as an enemy of the Orthodox Church, stricken down by the saintly patron of the city. In the small monastery in Bulgaria dedicated to the Holy Virgin and situated on the northern slope of Mount Vitoša which dominates Sofia, above the village of Dragolevci, there are several pictures accompanied by inscriptions representing military saints. And in one of these inscriptions we read how "the Great Demetrius Duka [General]," as the inscription calls him, galloping, strikes with his spear a Roman warrior who lies under the feet of his horse. Although everyone knew that the figure under the feet of the horse should represent the Bulgarian King, in this particular inscription the name of the King is indicated.

According to Professor A. Grabar, the painter, in this particular case, not only does not shrink from the painful task of representing one of the Bulgarian national heroes at the moment of triumph of his enemy and in the humiliating posture of the victim trampled by the victor, but even goes so far as to put his name in the pejorative form of "Skalojan," which is a

¹⁶ See A. Vasiliev, "An Edict of the Emperor Justinian II, September 668," *Speculum*, XVIII, 8. *Idem*, "L'Entrée triomphale de l'empereur Justinien II à Thessalonique en 688," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, XIII (1947), 358-364.

Bulgarian version of Σκυλοϊωάννης — “Dog-John,”¹⁷ as he was sometimes called by the Greeks.

In 1222 Theodore of Epirus took Thessalonica and assumed the imperial crown. The city became the capital of the ephemeral empire of Thessalonica. Then in 1246, fifteen years before the capture of Constantinople by Michael Palaeologus in 1261, John Vatatzes, the Emperor of Nicaea, took possession of Thessalonica, which became a sort of Western capital of the almost restored Byzantine Empire. At the outset of the fourteenth century, the Catalans, in their devastating march westward through the Balkan Peninsula, failed to seize or plunder Thessalonica.

Owing to all these facts, the memories of the miraculous protection of Thessalonica by Saint Demetrius were revived with a new strength, and he again became the central figure which powerfully attracted popular imagination, stimulated religious enthusiasm, and gave hope for a better future.

In this respect we have an extremely interesting document which deals with a synod held in Thessalonica in 1337 or 1338, during the patriarchate of John XIV Calecas (1333–1347). In this document a complaint was presented to the chartophylax of the city of Thessalonica to the effect that the inhabitants of Thessalonica venerate the slave more than the master; that they assemble in very great numbers in the church of the Holy Great Martyr bathed with fragrant ointment (μυροβλύτου), Demetrius, and pass by the church of Our Lord Saviour Christ. And the chartophylax said that the Thessalonians venerate the martyr more than Christ.¹⁸

The thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, owing to the events connected with Thessalonica which I have stressed above, saw the strong revival of the cult of Saint Demetrius. Men were fascinated not only by his miraculous help in that particular period; but they became interested in his previous deeds. And then, going back to the earlier times, they inescapably refreshed their minds with the most glorious page of the history of Thessalonica — the final liberation of the city from Slavonic danger in the eighties of the seventh century and the triumphal entrance of the Emperor Justinian II into the liberated city in 688. This fact of prime importance in the history of the city which ranked next to Constantinople was rather cast into oblivion by the other events of vital importance in the general history of the Empire

¹⁷ A. Grabar, *La Peinture religieuse en Bulgarie* (Paris, 1928), pp. 291, 299–300; plate LI, b (in Grabar's book, by misprint, this plate is given as plate 11 b).

¹⁸ ἀπῆλθε διεγκαλὼν πρὸς τὸν χαρτοφύλακα κατὰ τῶν τοιούτων ἐποίκων τῆς πόλεως ὅτε καὶ εἰπόντι, ὡς οὐδὲ τοῦτο καλῶς ποιοῦσιν οἱ τοὶ δὴ οἱ τῆς πόλεως ἐποικοὶ, ὅτι τὸν δοῦλον πλεόν τοῦ δεσπότου τιμῶσι, καὶ συναθροίζονται μὲν παμπληθεὶ εἰς τὸν ναὸν τοῦ ἁγίου μεγαλομάρτυρος καὶ μυροβλύτου Δημητρίου, τὸν δὲ ναὸν τοῦ δεσπότου σωτήρος Χριστοῦ παρατρέχουσιν, εἶπεν αὐτῷ δῆθεν ὁ χαρτοφύλαξ, ὅτι πλεόν τιμῶσιν οἱ θεσσαλονικεῖς τὸν μάρτυρα τοῦ Χριστοῦ. F. Miklosich et I. Müller, *Acta et diplomata graeca medii aevi*, I (Vienna, 1860), 170.

during the following four centuries. The merciless sack of Thessalonica in 904 by the Arabian pirates led by the Greek renegade, Leo of Tripolis, seemed to have shown that the powerful champion of the city had abandoned his beloved domain. But beginning with the end of the twelfth century, as we have indicated above, circumstances had entirely changed. Thessalonica again became the center of political interests and political combinations; its past gloriously connected with the miraculous protection of the city by Saint Demetrius was remembered, revived and, I may say, rewritten. The fight by the city against the Slavs, and its miraculous liberation from further Slavonic penetration which culminated in the triumphal entrance of Justinian II into the city, became widely known and enthusiastically welcomed. This is, in my opinion, the reason that such a piece as our tablet, which includes a reminiscence of a brilliant page of the past preserved in a Greek inscription and the much later emblems of the Palaeologan Age, could have appeared in the fourteenth century, in any case before the year 1430, when Thessalonica was captured by the Turks, who rudely upset the traditional belief that at the tragic moments of its history Thessalonica was protected and saved by the miraculous interference of the Great Martyr Saint Demetrius.